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ABSTRACT

This report uses data from the base year and first follow-up to the 1995-1996 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study to answer questions about college student employment and the persistence of employed students in higher education. Findings from the study show that among those who expect to earn a certificate from their first postsecondary institution, students who define themselves as employees who study seem to do as well as their peers at persisting in and completing their postsecondary programs. But employees who study seem to have a more difficult time than other working students in persisting when their expectations are to earn an associate's degree, and have a more difficult time than all other students when their expectations are to earn a bachelor's degree or higher level degree. One reason is the time constraints of employees who study. In addition, since the primary role of these individuals is as an employee, they are more likely to forgo schooling when time becomes an issue. Employees who study are also more likely to have personal backgrounds that are related to lower postsecondary completion. (SLD)

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

Stats in Brief

The Persistence of Employees Who Pursue Postsecondary Study

February 2002

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Stats *in Brief*

The Persistence of Employees Who Pursue Postsecondary Study

February 2002

Among the roughly 3 million students who began their postsecondary education in academic year 1995–96, about 70 percent worked while enrolled. Many of these working students (29 percent) defined themselves primarily as an employee who decided to enroll in school, indicating that there is a substantial number of postsecondary students whose primary focus is work. Who are these "employees who study," in what postsecondary institutions did they enroll, what were their educational expectations, and how likely were they to meet their expectations? This Stats in Brief uses data from the base year and first follow-up to the 1995–96 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/98) to answer these questions.

Student/Employee Role and Level of First Institution

Among all 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students, 32 percent did not work while enrolled (referred to in this brief as "nonworking students"), 48 percent worked while enrolled and considered themselves a student working to meet expenses (referred to as "students who work"), and 20 percent worked while enrolled and defined themselves as an employee who decided to enroll in school (referred to as "employees who study") (table 1). Employees who study were more likely than other students to have first enrolled in a 2-year institution and less likely than other students to have first enrolled in a 4-year institution. For example, about three-quarters (73 percent) of employees who study first enrolled in a 2-year institution, compared to 50 percent of students who work and 35 percent of nonworking students (table 1). While employees who study were more likely to have first enrolled in a less-than-2-year institution than were students who work, they were less likely to do so than were nonworking students.

Students may enroll in different institutions in part because they have different degree expectations.[1] Generally speaking, employees who study were more likely to expect to earn either no postsecondary credential (i.e., no degree or certificate) or a credential below the bachelor's degree level, while students who work and nonworking students were more likely to expect to earn a bachelor's degree or higher (table 1). The only exception to this pattern was that employees who study were about as likely as nonworking students to expect to earn a certificate.

Student Completion and Persistence

The BPS:96/98 data allow for an examination of student completion and persistence as of spring 1998, about 3 years after most students had first enrolled. Because students pursuing a postsecondary credential often take more than 3 years to complete their programs, it is important to consider both completion (i.e., whether a student had earned a postsecondary credential by 1998) as well as persistence (i.e.,

Table 1.—Percentage distribution of beginning postsecondary students overall and according to level of first institution and highest degree expected at first institution, by student/employee role: 1995–96

Student/ employee role	Total	Institution level			Highest degree expected at first institution			
		4-year	2-year	Less-than-2-year	No degree	Certificate	Associate's degree[1]	Bachelor's degree or higher[2]
Total	**100.0**	**41.1**	**49.7**	**9.2**	**8.8**	**13.9**	**28.7**	**48.7**
Employees who study	20.1	15.7	73.4	10.9	17.4	22.9	37.2	22.4
Students who work	48.3	44.8	49.9	5.2	5.6	8.1	29.9	56.5
Nonworking students	31.7	50.3	34.9	14.7	8.3	17.4	20.5	53.8

[1] Includes students expecting to transfer to a 2-year school.
[2] Includes students expecting to transfer to a 4-year school.
NOTE: Percentages may not add to totals because of rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1995–96 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, "First Follow-up."

whether a student was enrolled in a postsecondary institution in 1998). Table 2 indicates the percentage of beginning 1995–96 students who had earned a degree or certificate by spring 1998, the percentage who had not earned a degree or certificate but were enrolled in spring 1998, and the percentage who were not enrolled in spring 1998 and had not earned a degree or certificate.

Table 2.—Percentage distribution of 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students according to spring 1998 completion and persistence, by student/employee role and highest degree expected at first institution

Student/employee role and highest degree expected	Completed by spring 1998	No degree, enrolled spring 1998	No degree, left without returning
Total	**15.9**	**51.9**	**32.3**
Student/employee role			
Employees who study	19.8	26.4	53.8
Students who work	13.7	58.9	27.4
Nonworking students	18.6	54.7	26.7
Highest degree expected at first institution			
No degree	11.9	28.5	59.6
Employees who study	7.4	21.3	71.3
Students who work	7.9	38.1	54.1
Nonworking students	21.1	28.4	50.5
Certificate	54.3	9.7	36.0
Employees who study	50.9	9.6	39.5
Students who work	51.4	15.7	32.8
Nonworking students	59.7	5.0	35.2
Associate's degree[1]	20.5	36.5	43.0
Employees who study	14.7	27.1	58.2
Students who work	23.6	40.9	35.5
Nonworking students	22.0	33.6	44.4
Bachelor's degree or higher[2]	5.0	76.5	18.5
Employees who study	8.0	48.3	43.8
Students who work	4.2	77.4	18.4
Nonworking students	4.4	83.8	11.9

[1] Includes students expecting to transfer to a 2-year school.
[2] Includes students expecting to transfer to a 4-year school.
NOTE: Percentages may not add to totals because of rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1995–96 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, "First Follow-up."

Twenty percent of employees who study had earned a degree or certificate by spring 1998, a completion rate higher than the rate for students who work (14 percent) and about the same as the rate for nonworking students (19 percent). However, employees who study were less likely to be persisting in school; that is, they were less likely to be enrolled in spring 1998 without having earned a degree or certificate, and they were about twice as likely as other students to have left postsecondary education without a degree or certificate by 1998 (54 percent compared to 27 percent).

Students' completion and persistence, however, may be related to their degree expectations. Students not expecting to earn a degree or certificate, for example, may be less likely to be enrolled or to have earned a credential by 1998 than those expecting to earn a postsecondary credential. Because the degree expectations of employees who study were found to be somewhat different from those of other students, it is more informative to compare postsecondary outcomes among students who held similar degree expectations.

Completion and Persistence Among Students with Similar Degree Expectations

Table 2 indicates that among students who did not expect to earn a postsecondary credential and among students seeking a certificate, employees who study were generally as likely as other students to have earned a credential, to be persisting in school, or to have dropped out as of spring 1998.[2] The one exception was that among those who did not expect to earn a credential, employees who study were less likely to have earned a degree or certificate than were nonworking students.

Among students seeking an associate's degree, employees who study were about as likely as their peers to have earned a degree or certificate by spring 1998. Employees who study were, however, less likely than students who work to be persisting in school and were more likely than students who work to have dropped out as of spring 1998.

Among students expecting to earn at least a bachelor's degree, employees who study were about as likely as other students to have earned a degree or certificate. Employees who study, however, were less likely than all other students to be persisting in school and were more likely than all other students to have dropped out as of spring 1998.

Background Characteristics and Student Completion and Persistence

These results suggest that among students who expected to earn an associate's degree or higher, employees who study generally were less likely than their peers to persist in postsecondary education. Employees who study, however, differ from their peers on other characteristics that might account for the differences observed in table 2. Previous research has identified a number of student background characteristics that are related to lower levels of completion and persistence among those expecting to earn a degree. These characteristics include full-time employment while enrolled, being a single parent, and not having a standard high school diploma (e.g., Horn 1996). In addition, among students who expect to earn a bachelor's degree or higher,

having parents with lower educational attainment is also related to lower levels of postsecondary persistence and completion (National Center for Education Statistics 2001). Employees who study generally were more likely than students who work to have these characteristics. Employees who study were more likely than students who work to be single parents and to have completed high school through a GED. Employees who study were also less likely than their peers to have a parent with a bachelor's degree or higher; 20 percent of employees who study had a parent with at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 39 percent of students who work and 37 percent of nonworking students. Finally, about 63 percent of employees who study worked full time, compared to 22 percent of students who work. However, even among degree-seeking students who worked full time, employees who study were more likely to have left school without returning and less likely to be enrolled in spring 1998 than were students who work.

Conclusions

Among those who expect to earn a certificate from their first postsecondary institution, students who define themselves as employees who study seem to do as well as their peers at persisting in and completing their postsecondary programs. But employees who study seem to have a more difficult time than other working students in persisting when their expectations are to earn an associate's degree, and a more difficult time than all other students in persisting when their expectations are to earn a bachelor's or higher level degree. This persistence problem has many potential causes. Since employees who study are more likely than other students to be full-time workers, they face greater time constraints that may make it more difficult for them to continue their studies. In addition, because their primary role is as an employee rather than as a student, they may be more likely than other students to forgo schooling for work when time (or other factors) becomes an issue. Finally, employees who study are more likely than their peers to have personal backgrounds that are related to lower postsecondary completion and persistence; these background characteristics may also contribute to persistence problems. In short, for a variety of reasons, employees who enroll in college to pursue a degree appear to be a group of postsecondary students who are particularly at risk for not persisting.

[1] The expectations data reported here refer to expectations at the institution in which students were first enrolled. However, students expecting to transfer to a 4-year institution were classified as expecting to earn a bachelor's degree, and students expecting to transfer to a 2-year institution were classified as expecting to earn an associate's degree. These reclassifications were made based on the assumption that students who transferred did so with the intent of obtaining a degree at the transfer institution. The term "degree" is used in this brief as a generic term (including any type of credential that indicates the completion of a postsecondary program) when referring to "degree expectations" and "highest degree expected."

[2] Because the number of students who did not expect to earn a postsecondary credential is relatively small, these estimates have large standard errors, and therefore some of the apparent differences are not statistically significant.

References

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